

U.S. HOLOCAUST MUSEUM PLAYS LEADING ROLE AS ROMANIAN GOVERNMENT'S CONFRONTS ITS HOLOCAUST PAST

WASHINGTON, DC—When Paul Shapiro, Radu Ionaid and Sara Bloomfield of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, were among those who presented the International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania's final report to Romanian President Ion Iliescu in November 2004, it represented a milestone in the Museum's ongoing efforts to prod the former Nazi ally and, later, Communist state to recognize its central role in the Holocaust. Among other initiatives, the Commission's report establishes a national Holocaust Remembrance Day and follows recent efforts to introduce Holocaust education into Romanian classrooms and the opening the country's archives to Romanian and international scholars. The Museum played a crucial role in leading and realizing these initiatives.

“The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum's years of work in Romania has helped the country honestly confront its past and in doing so, aided it in its quest to become more fully integrated with the West,” states Paul Shapiro, Director of the Museum's Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies. “Romania, already a member of NATO, is also hoping to enter the European Union, and the country's recognition of its Holocaust past is part of the process the country needs to go through to reach this goal.”

Romania's complex history as a Nazi ally and subsequently one of the most oppressive European Communist states has hindered the nation's ability to examine its wartime past. Romanian World War II leader Marshal Ion Antonescu was an early and committed Hitler ally, and under his leadership during the Holocaust, the Romanian army and gendarmerie actively participated in the roundups, deportations and murder of Jews and Roma.

“Other than Nazi Germany, Romania was the largest perpetrator government during the Holocaust,” says Radu Ionaid, Director, of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum's International Archives Program. “Antonecu's fascist regime was directly responsible for the deaths of between 280,000 and 380,000 Romanian and Ukrainian Jews, and the deportation of approximately 25,000 Roma.”

Under Communism, the Romanian government falsely maintained that all Jewish and Roma deaths were at the hands of the Germans and Hungarians. Following Communism's collapse the nation avoided discussion of the topic in official and civic discourse. However, in the 1990s, as the country continued to lag behind other post-Soviet nations in economic and cultural development, politicians of all stripes began to lionize Antonescu as an anti-Communist, nationalist leader of Romanian independence.

Monuments to Antonescu were erected throughout the country, and streets and public buildings were re-named in his honor. While political support could be garnered through these actions, a number of politicians, journalists and others realized the official

rehabilitation of a mass murderer was detrimental not only to nascent Romanian democracy but also to Romania's efforts to become a full member of Western political society.

For almost ten years, the Museum has worked with Romanian officials to change the way the country faces its history. The Museum's extensive negotiations with the Romanian Information Service (SRI), the Ministry of Defense, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister of the Interior/Romanian State Archives has resulted in the country opening its Holocaust-era archives to Romanian and international scholars. Researchers have since discovered troves of information, including millions of pages of documentation, detailing Antonescu's intimate involvement with the Nazis and of his oversight of deportation and murder of Jews and Roma.

The International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania was established by Romanian President Iliescu in October 2003 and chaired by Nobel Prize Laureate Elie Wiesel. President Iliescu invited prominent Romanians to participate in the Commission, while the Museum selected the others and played a leading role in drafting the final report. In addition to the establishment of Holocaust Remembrance Day, the Commission recommended the establishment of a Holocaust memorial in Bucharest, the introduction of Holocaust education into Romanian classrooms, and more. The country has also passed European-inspired laws prohibiting the cult of war criminals and Holocaust denial. All of these actions are helping move the nation toward Western acceptance.

"The Museum's stature as a Federal institution and an international center of Holocaust scholarship allows it to play a unique role in encouraging other nations to honestly and publicly examine their roles during the Holocaust," states Museum Director Sara Bloomfield.

In December 2005, Romania was elected as a full member of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research—a 19-member organization that develops education, memorial and archival projects worldwide.

"Certainly some Romanians are supporting these reforms solely as a means to solidify Western alliances," continues Paul Shapiro. "However, making this information available to researchers, school students and the general Romanian public, opens a historical Pandora's Box. As the history permeates Romanian academic and civil society, the nation will be taking a crucial step toward joining the democratic international community."

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